Faced with ongoing deregulation, with companies overstepping their roles, and with decision makers and health authorities who still fail to make patients’ interests their top priority, it is up to healthcare professionals to assure quality of care and maintain patient trust.

**Training and education.** Quality healthcare requires continuing education for healthcare professionals and reliable information for patients. This implies:

- basic education for all healthcare professionals in the principles of critical appraisal (Rev Prescrire n°320), so that they are in a position to analyse clinical assessment data on individual drugs, instead of relying solely on others’ judgement (Rev Prescrire n°321); it is particularly important to be able to distinguish surrogate endpoints from robust outcomes that take adverse effects into account (Rev Prescrire n°320);
- searching SPCs for important “buried” information such as clinical trial data and adverse effects (Rev Prescrire n°319);
- being able to recognise a drug’s pharmacological class, notably by using international nonproprietary names (INNs), in order to avoid exposing patients to known adverse effects (Prescrire Int n°108);
- reminding patients not to believe everything they read or hear in the media. Reports of research results in the lay media can be misleading: many researchers have a tendency to exaggerate the significance of their findings, both for financial reasons and for personal status (Rev Prescrire n°320);
- acknowledging one’s errors, as part of a constructive attitude towards improving professional practice (Prescrire Int n°109).

**Mobilise!** The positive impact that healthcare professionals and patients can have on healthcare quality was illustrated by several events in 2010:

- a French physician succeeded in bringing the severe adverse effects of benfluorex (ex-Mediator°) to the public’s attention (Rev Prescrire n°325 and www.english.prescrire.org), and a national health insurer (Cnamts) commissioned a study of its adverse effects (issue 316 p. 114), both of which led to benfluorex being withdrawn from the French market;
- patient groups successfully lobbied for market reinstatement of 100-mg capsules of olavirenz that are adapted to the treatment of certain HIV-infected young children (Rev Prescrire n°320).

Some of the advertisements banned by the French regulator (Afssaps) in 2010 are particularly informative:

- misleading comparison and overstated results for Alimia° (pemetrexed) and Loramyco° (miconazole) (Rev Prescrire n°318);
- minimisation of the risks of Botoxa° (botoxulinum toxin A) (Rev Prescrire n°318);
- overstated claims concerning the indications for Calciprat vitamine D3° and Caltrate vitamine D3° (calcium + vitamin D3), Gardasil° (papillomavirus vaccine 6, 11, 16, 18), Lacteol° (Lactobacillus acidophilus) and Solacy° (vitamin A + L cystine + sulphur + yeast) (Rev Prescrire n°318; 323; 326);
- misleading information on the indications for Inoler° (ferrous succinate) (Rev Prescrire n°318);
- unfounded criticism of generic versions of Omelexa° (tamsulosin) (Rev Prescrire n°318);
- overly positive presentation of Exlorgea° (amlodipine + valsartan) and Tarega° (valsartan) by opinion leaders (Rev Prescrire n°323).

In the United States, legal action taken against the company marking quetiapine (Seroquel°) revealed the extent to which some firms are willing to go to promote their products: off-label promotion, financial incentives for physicians to write or even simply sign articles on off-label uses. The company was forced to refund public health insurers for the costs of unwarranted prescriptions (Prescrire Int n°112).

**Patients first!**

In 2010, as in previous years, there was a dearth of real therapeutic advance as well as continued failings of policy makers and healthcare authorities, such as approval of poorly evaluated drugs with negative risk-benefit balances, or failure to withdraw them from the market.

Unable to rely on regulatory agencies and healthcare authorities, it is up to healthcare professionals to select drugs that truly benefit their patients and avoid needlessly exposing them to the risk of adverse effects.

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